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AUTHOR Nikolic, Vesna

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that self-evaluation should be a significant component of teachers' daily work, presenting a model of systematic self-evaluation to help teachers generate classroom solutions through self-study (thus leading them to more complex forms of classroom inquiry). After a historical and theoretical perspective, the paper proposes a taxonomy that distinguishes three interrelated categories: small-scale, teacher-initiated inquiry (self-evaluation projects); teacher action research; and academic research. The hierarchical relationship between them implies an increase in complexity, with teacher-initiated inquiry being the least demanding method. The model advocates systematic work on self-study in several stages that together form a cycle. It starts with awareness of teaching areas that need attention through questionnaires, video/audio taping, checklists, and guided journals; establishment of a systematic process of self-evaluation by identifying strengths and weaknesses; setting priorities, planning a course of action, defining criteria for evaluation, and experimenting with identified areas of teaching; observing and analyzing findings; and modifying and improving teaching practice. Important principles include the following: work on tasks short enough to be completed within limited time frames; provide teachers with support during initial stages; and avoid any aspect of the process that may turn teachers off. (Contains 36 references.) (SM)

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Self-evaluation and improved teaching practice

Vesna Nikolic

Introduction

Even the best of us occasionally have bad teaching days, and I still distinctly recall one of my first substitute teaching days in Canada as such. After having taught in high school in Croatia for almost fifteen years, and not yet having learned enough about the culture of students on the North American continent, I started a substitute assignment in a challenging split grade 7/8 class. A wrong decision made on that particular day had a snowball effect and led to all kinds of bad scenarios. Practically in tears, I later pondered what I could have done differently and how my classroom management techniques could be adapted to be effective with Canadian students. As I was analysing my actions, I realized that the process made me feel less frustrated, and I actually did come up with some practical solutions for my next assignments.

Even before this episode in my career, I strongly believed that self-evaluation should be a significant component of teachers' daily work. I became even more convinced of its importance when I thought of the impact of my teaching on that day in terms of numbers. There were 27 students in class, and when the possible number of parents, grandparents, siblings and friends who may have asked "How was school today?" is added to that number, I estimated that well over eighty people may have directly or indirectly assessed the effectiveness of my work. The awareness of how powerful teachers' roles are pointed to the conclusion that educators should never lose sight of the consequences of their actions.

The objective of this article is not to offer solutions to the classroom challenges such as the one I faced, since uniform solutions do not exist. Rather, the intent is to advocate a non-

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threatening, sustainable model of systematic self-evaluation that can assist teachers in generating classroom solutions through self-study, and that can gradually lead them to more complex forms of classroom inquiry. In addition to presenting a framework for it, I will briefly examine how this form of exploratory practice relates to academic research and teacher research, and discuss some commonly expressed concerns.

Historical and theoretical perspective

Even though the idea of teacher as a reflective practitioner has long been present in education (Dewey, 1933), the notions such as exploratory practice, self-evaluation, self-assessment, teacher research, and action research have never been given as much attention as after 1985. While discussing models of supervisory evaluation in his early work, Freeman (1982) mentioned self-evaluation as an option; some of his later work (1998) is fully devoted to teacher research with self-evaluation as its element. Only 18% of MA programs in Canada and the USA gave action research adequate attention in the early eighties (Nunan, 1989). Judging by the content of courses offered at education-related graduate and postgraduate programs today, one could assume that this figure has considerably changed. Numerous presentations at conferences on the umbrella topic of reflective teaching, and a substantial body of recently published literature proves that many important voices of L2 theory have devoted their work to teachers as researchers (Edge, 2001; Freeman, 1998; Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Schon, 1987; Wajnryb, 1992; Wells et al., 1994). The written work of author-practitioners confirms that the concept of exploratory practice has also gained wide acceptance outside of

academic circles (Assinder, 1991; Hawkey, 1995; Koehler, 1990; Kurtz, 1996; Laycock & Bunnag, 1991; Schwartz, 1992; Setteducatti, 1995).

The interest in self-evaluation through reflective teaching, listed in the literature as a powerful technique that turns teachers into expert practitioners (Haertel, 1993), has increased for two reasons. Self-evaluation generates opportunities for meaningful professional growth and positive change in teacher behaviour. By utilizing a variety of reflective teaching techniques, teachers are better able to interpret their own and their students' behaviour. Since they reflect and self-evaluate voluntarily, they are motivated to change, and this change may be permanent. Also, systematic work on one's professional growth increases opportunities for improvement without supervisory involvement. The literature suggests that supervision has rarely been found to have a positive lasting effect on teacher behaviour. Despite supervisors' best intentions, genuine change seldom occurs as a result of supervisory visits or formal evaluation (Grimmet, Rostad, and Ford, 1992; Wright 1998). It occurs when teachers take responsibility for themselves and the teaching profession (Sergiovanni, 1992) by becoming aware of the teaching patterns that need improvement, through willingness to take risks, and willingness to change. It is generally accepted that teachers who are willing to work on self-study and become cognizant of the actions that need to be perfected can alter these actions where necessary (Freeman, 1988; Wright, 1998). Studies confirm that most teachers, once they become aware that an aspect of their teaching repertoire repeatedly does not generate desired results, resort to risks and experiments to fix it (Huberman, 1992).

An additional argument for self-evaluation is a loud public outcry on the North American continent for accountability in education (Guskey, 1998), which is bringing supervisors and theorists under increased pressure to encourage reflectiveness, and teachers to practice it, thus ensuring that teaching results in learning and assisting the students in reaching their full potential. Assuming that the listed arguments are on target, one of the main objectives of pre-service, in-service and supervisory support should be to create opportunities for teachers to act as experts.

Ways of achieving mastery

As noted earlier, effectiveness and mastery in the classroom can best be achieved through self-study and self-evaluation of one's teaching. In his article on teacher development and instructional mastery, Huberman (1992) discusses findings of a study conducted with 160 teachers in Switzerland. "In ninety percent of the cases," Huberman states, "respondents say they act alone, …on their subject matter or on small experiments in which the materials or instructional modes were varied incrementally until a promising mix was found" (p. 135). Huberman's conclusion is that the best scenario for a satisfactory career development is a craft model, where teachers experiment in order to develop a repertoire of instructional strategies. This, in turn, enables them to understand the classroom situations better and faster, and to respond to challenges with a greater variety of tools. According to Huberman, teachers should be encouraged to spontaneously reflect on their teaching through trial-and-error techniques, or with a small group of colleagues, in informal and idiosyncratic ways. Another survey, related to effective supervisory practices and carried out by the author of this article in May 2000 (Nikolic,

2001), generated similar findings. Over sixty percent of respondents - Toronto Catholic District School Board adult ESL instructors - felt that the systematic process of reflection either worked best for them or helped them to a large extent to achieve their full potential. The literature lists a variety of commonly used self-evaluation techniques, such as diaries, journals, questionnaires, video or audio taping of lessons, peer evaluation, portfolio evaluation, annual or sessional professional development plans, role reversal - teachers as learners, group professional development projects, action research, and team teaching (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, 2001; Freeman, 1998; Lowe, 1987; Nunan and Lamb, 1995; Tirri, 1993).

Sustainable forms of classroom inquiry and applicable standards

Not unlike research, self-evaluative classroom inquiry must satisfy two criteria: quality and sustainability. Bearing them in mind, our question is: How high can the standards be set for classroom investigation to be sustainable?

Aware of the growing popularity of teacher research, and the significance of identifying the criteria for standards applicable to different forms of research, the TESOL organization formed a committee in 1995 with the objective of articulating standards for teachers conducting research in their own classrooms. The initiative generated an interesting discussion by two salient voices of L2 teaching, Allwright (1997) and Nunan (1997). Even though Allwright has been advocating practitioner research for years, he "increasingly encountered an irreconcillable conflict between the demands of quality and sustainability" (p. 368). Teachers found research so burdensome that it often resulted in poor quality. In Allwright's opinion, the same standards

cannot be applied to all types of research. If exploratory practice has to meet academic standards, it is damagingly counterproductive. Allwright's solution lies in adjusting the standards and expectations for teacher research in such a manner that it is not an intolerable burden. Regardless of the potential danger - a threat to the quality - it is still a preferable model to the teacher burnout scenario. Nunan, however, recommends that the same type of research and ethical standards be applied to teacher research and academic research. Even though he is aware of the issue of sustainability, he feels that all types of research should be carried out with rigor.

To some extent, this dilemma of standards and sustainability can be attributed to the conceptual ambiguity in the literature, where a variety of terms are used for similar or synonymous practices: exploratory practice, reflective teaching, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment, self-study, self-directed teaching, and action research. The literature is ambiguous whether these techniques differ in terms of applicable standards, and if so, how? Can every attempt to conduct exploratory practice be considered a research project and evaluated against the research standards? Does every action research project comply with the high standards of academic research? We have all observed projects that do, but also many of those that do not. It is those action research projects that point to the fact that not all instances of reflective teaching can be labeled as research. Nunan rightfully points out that "practitioner – initiated inquiry is better characterized as reflective or exploratory teaching rather than research" (p. 366). Consequently, a taxonomy that takes into consideration the complexity of each of the inquiry types and sets standards accordingly is needed.

The taxonomy I propose distinguishes three categories, rather than two:

- Small-scale teacher-initiated inquiry (self-evaluation projects)
- Teacher/action research
- Academic research

Each of the three categories has its distinct characteristics, but it is not possible to draw a clear line between them. They are an interrelated continuum, in which one category logically leads into the next one (see Figure 1).

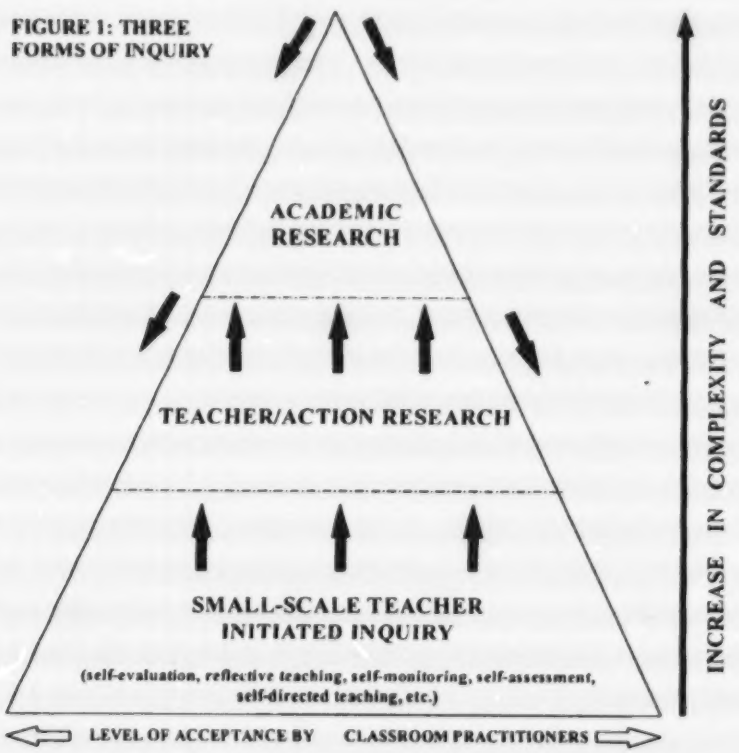
ACADEMIC RESEARCH
TEACHER/ACTION RESEARCH
SMALL-SCALE TEACHER INITIATED INQUIRY
(self-evaluation, reflective teaching, self-monitoring, self-assessment, self-directed teaching, etc.)
INCREASE IN COMPLEXITY AND STANDARDS
LEVEL OF ACCEPTANCE BY CLASSROOM PRACTITIONERS

FIGURE 1: THREE FORMS OF INQUIRY

The hierarchical relationship between them implies an increase in complexity, with teacher-initiated inquiry being the least demanding method. Compared to teacher or academic research, it involves a somewhat lower level of teacher input in terms of time and work scope. Reflection on one's practice does not always imply complex research design, statistics, data gathered in a written form, and written interpretation of data. Small-scale teacher-initiated inquiry may refer to a simple self-evaluation task, during which the teacher experiments with one particular aspect of teaching. For example, she monitors pacing of an activity with the current group of learners and creates action plans for future improvement if necessary, based on the data collected formally or informally. Teachers do not always need control groups and statistics to determine that a certain instructional method is effective or beneficial for their students. Small-scale classroom inquiry experiments, if conducted conscientiously, can do the trick. This does not mean that teachers do not need to be encouraged to conduct action/academic research. It means that they should work their way to research gradually, starting with less demanding small-scale experiments as the first step in the process. The crucial issue is to get them started on a small-scale, rather than to set unrealistic expectations and cause teacher burnout.

Regardless of the fact that self-evaluation may be a starting point for both teacher research and academic research, it is not synonymous with either one. Small-scale inquiry targets current classroom issues and is usually successful at improving classroom practice locally. Findings may be quite idiosyncratic; in many cases they are applicable only to a particular class with a particular teacher, in a particular set of circumstances. To make this form of classroom

inquiry sustainable, standards and expectations should be set a notch lower than for teacher/action research, and at least several notches lower than for academic research.

Task-based model of self-evaluation

Relying on the assumption, confirmed by Huberman's study, that positive change can best be accomplished if one constantly monitors and questions one's teaching practice, my colleague Hanna Cabaj and I attempted to design a sustainable framework for self-evaluation projects, with a rationale that some teachers may not have the skills to conduct classroom investigation, or simply do not know where to start (Nikolic and Cabaj, 2000). Our initiative was driven by a desire to create a support system for self-study projects in adult ESL programs in hopes that it would empower teachers with strategies and skills to grow professionally by working on their own. This support system consists of a series of miniature self-evaluation tasks, each of which focuses on a single teaching aspect, and can be dealt with at teachers' own pace and according to their interests, challenges and needs. The selected sample tasks in the Appendix merely illustrate the type of task that can be used in adult ESL programs.

The model advocates systematic work on self-study in several stages that together form a cycle. It starts with:

- Awareness of teaching areas that need attention through questionnaires, video/audio taping, checklists, guided journals, etc.

- Establishing a systematic process of self-evaluation by identifying strengths and weaknesses
- Setting priorities, planning a course of action, defining criteria for evaluation and experimenting with the identified areas of teaching
- Observing and analysing findings, and evaluating the impact of changes in the classroom.
- Modifying and improving teaching practice and setting objectives for future development

Principles and challenges

When working on self-evaluation, teachers face several challenges, such as time constraints, reluctance to participate, and insufficient support. The model attempts to address these, by bearing the following principles in mind:

1. Teachers should work on tasks short enough to be completed within the limited time frames they have at their disposal. They are already swamped with preparation, professional development activities, correction of students' work, long hours, extracurricular activities, and school and home duties, and may perceive classroom inquiry as a daunting activity. However, any time-consuming activity can easily be dealt with if broken into numerous small tasks, which makes small-scale self-evaluation projects feasible (Nikolic, 2002). Instead of getting involved with large projects at the initial stages, teachers should start with a series of miniature tasks that can be built into their schedules.

2. The materialization of professional development initiatives is often hindered by reluctance of teachers to participate. Many feel that their colleagues may perceive them as weak performers if they publicly admit they work on self-evaluation, and this may erode their reputation. The solution is to turn self-evaluation into a widely accepted model of professional development, through networks of teachers with common interests and concerns working in their own little corners and then sharing their findings, or working on projects together. If teachers feel their colleagues' support, then communities of inquiry within schools or departments can gain grassroots acceptance and become a reality (Wells, 1994). However, effective implementation of such a model of professional development with the long-term objective to pave the way for teacher research takes time and patience.

3. It is crucial that teachers be offered support during the initial stages. Collective experience has taught us that where sufficient support was offered, projects were successful (Nunan, 1989). The model advocated here offers support through in-service and ready-to-use tasks generated from the literature or produced by support staff during the initial stages (Airasian & Gullickson, 1997; Nikolic and Cabaj, 2000; Nunan and Lamb, 1995; Wajnryb, 1992; Bress, 2002). Through this initial support teachers build strategies to gradually develop tasks with their own teaching circumstances and concerns in mind - a concept similar to concept of scaffolding in teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

4. Any aspect of the process that may be a "turn off" should be avoided. For example, many procedures for video/audio self-evaluation suggested in the literature require pages of transcripts. While it may be problematic to carry out meaningful data analyses without transcripts, the tedious nature of this job may discourage many teachers from participating. Therefore, the initial video-self evaluation tasks should be based on transcripts of very short lesson segments that focus on one teaching aspect. Once teachers realize how beneficial transcripts are, they may be motivated to pursue more complex projects.

5. The literature confirms that teachers' perceptions of their teaching do not provide an accurate assessment of their performance in that the perceptions are usually more positive than the reality (Wright, 1998). Since no single source of data accurately mirrors the classroom reality, teachers may not be able to objectively reconstruct what has happened during a lesson, and in the event that the class had not been video/audio taped, Rashomon-style stories may be the only available accounts. The solution is a combination approach, with two or more techniques used simultaneously. Video/audio self-evaluation should be a back-up technique wherever possible, as this may generate a more objective account of classroom events. Peer evaluation or video/audio taping can be combined with a checklist or monitoring.

6. Most teachers do reflect on their lessons, but they do it sporadically – in many cases only when their repertoire of strategies fails. The model described here advocates systematic, life-long commitment to self-assessment, rather than occasional reflection.

Conclusion

The goal of developing the model of self-evaluation advocated here was twofold: to improve teaching at a local level through a sustainable model of professional growth within a Continuing Education Department, and to create a springboard for high quality teacher research by starting on a small scale. Projects carried out through series of short self-evaluation tasks, first offered to teachers as a ready-to-use support system, and later custom-created by teachers themselves, may be a solid starting point for teacher and academic research. These projects pose a lower risk of early abandonment than teacher research, and as such may gain faster and easier acceptance by classroom practitioners.

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APPENDIX A: Keeping your students informed

The objective of this task is to encourage you to think about the importance of keeping your students informed about what you do in class. Feel free to adapt or skip any segment of this task that you deem irrelevant for your circumstances.

1. How important do you feel it is important that the students be informed at the beginning of each lesson about what you are planning to do during the lesson and the objectives you have set? How important do you think that informing your students about what is planned for the next day at the end of each lesson should be a part of your daily work? Do your students think it is worthwhile to have an outline of every lesson on the chalkboard? Why or why not? What do your colleagues think about it?
Monitor this area during your next teaching week and circle the days below:

I explained to students what I was planning to do during the lesson on					
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
I explained to my students the objective(s) of the lesson on					
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
I informed my students at the end of the lesson about my plan for the next day on					
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday

2. In order to make your students more active in directing the program, discuss the importance of these issues with them. What have you found out?

(Created by Nikolic and Cabaj)

APPENDIX B: Techniques for teaching grammar

Peer learning can be a powerful tool for improving your teaching skills and may assist you in sharing and learning your and someone else's tricks of the trade. Discuss a grammar teaching issue with your colleague(s), and fill out the chart.

Structure you have taught	*How did you deal with it?*	*How did your colleague deal with it?*

Try to compare your views and approaches. Do your colleagues teach the structures you listed in the chart in the same manner as you do? If not, what are the similarities and differences? What

techniques or resources that they use, and you do not, do you think would be worth trying out? What insights have you gained by sharing your experiences with your colleagues?

(Created by Nikolic and Cabaj)

APPENDIX C: Connect with your students

It doesn't matter how many years you've been teaching, you will undoubtedly go through periods when you feel you're not really connecting with your class. By concentrating on improving the clarity of your communication, you should find that you communicate better, and that you and your class stop talking past each other. The result should be a closer teacher-student bond and more effective teaching and learning. Please take a long hard look at yourself and then give yourself a score out of ten for each one. Work on each of the points you prioritized until you have clearly achieved your acceptable score.

Communication component	Score
Starting the lesson • Smiling • Greeting all the students (including latecomers) • Saying/asking something personal	☐ ☐ ☐
Listening to students • Really focusing on what students are trying to say • Encouraging them to continue speaking by nodding head and making "I understand" noises • Checking that you've understood the message (when necessary)	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Speaking to students • Enunciating clearly • Speaking loudly enough for all students to hear • Speaking slowly enough • Making your sentences as simple as you can • Checking that students have understood you (when necessary)	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Body Language (throughout the lesson) • Facing the class full-on • Keeping your arms unfolded • Keeping your hands away from your face • Not fidgeting	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Finishing the lesson • Giving a clear signal that the lesson is over • Saying something personal • Smiling	☐ ☐ ☐

It's well worth saying that you may want to enlist the help of a colleague to give you a fresh pair of eyes. You could also ask your class. I'm sure they'd appreciate your candour.

Adapted, with permission, from Bress, P. (2002). Connect with your class. English Teaching Professional, 22, 60.

Biography

Vesna Nikolic, currently a Program Consultant with the Toronto Catholic District School Board, has been working in ESL/EFL for twenty-three years in Croatia and Canada. She holds an M.A. degree in Teacher Development from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. As a frequent presenter at local and international conferences, Vesna focuses on teacher development, listening comprehension, and effective supervision. She is the co-author of Am I Teaching Well? with Hanna Cabaj.

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